TRAGEDY IN THE CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN THEATRE

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For Kevin, Jason, and Thelma; George and Elaine;
and Jim (in memoriam) and Mary

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The study would like to maintain the distinction between theatre with -re for the concept, as in the multi-volume *The Theatre of Tennessee Williams*, and theater with -er for the building, as in the Public Theater. The difficulty is that there is no uniformity among scholars and companies.

Introduction

Questioning Tragedy's Vitality and Relevance

The 21st-century's opening decade saw the publication of two books on tragedy that not only provide a comprehensive coverage of the genre's history but also explore its significance outside the theatre. In short, proving the vitality and relevance of the terms tragic and tragedy, they are books anyone interested in the art form and the experience conveyed by the terms would want to own: Terry Eagleton, *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003) and Jennifer Wallace, *The Cambridge Introduction to Tragedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007). The same decade, however, saw the performance of three American plays that in questioning that vitality and relevance led to the writing of this book that examines tragedy as an art form in the contemporary American theatre. So far as this study knows, the earliest of the five works, the two books and three plays, appeared only in publication in the United States with no indication of an American staging after the 2001 London Gate Theatre production.

The playwright is Will Eno, and the play is *Tragedy: A Tragedy*. It is presented as a telecast of breaking news with Frank in the Studio the anchorperson orchestrating information from sources such as John in the Field covering the event and Constance at the Home supplementing with human-interest offshoots. The play begins with Frank intoning rhetorical devices. A sound repeated with minute variation: "sun…has set. Settling." Balance: "outward signs of…inward vitality." Parenthetical element: "we understand." Contrast: "glowing…gone." And the above are delivered in stately cadence creating an authoritative tone repeated by subsequent voices such as John's with his contribution to the devices: "passersby to the suffering, slowly passing by" and "seen so much so fast, and such sadness."[1] But what

caused the suffering and sadness is not stated. From the devices with their imagery of light disappearing in darkness, the audience concludes that the event is catastrophic: the onset of eternal darkness that augurs the end of the world.

The difficulty with the conclusion is the discrepancy between the gravity of the event and the reporting of it. When John next speaks, he reports on the behavior of dogs "licking hands, yawning, circling before lying down, and making their tags and collars jingle" (52). When Constance speaks, to report on a darkened and apparently empty house yet with a lawn sprinkler still rhythmically sprinkling, the language turns back on itself: "What is felt most here is the mystery. The unspectacular mystery. What remains for us to feel—after having knelt down to feel the worn-out welcome mat, looked up at the humble shape of a simple house—is, again, the mystery" (53). The two remaining cast members also contribute to the event's displacement. Stationed at the Capitol building, legal adviser Michael reports in language expressing his imagination. He will get back to Frank when disclosure comes in a "smoothly delivered speech from a suntanned man with an easy style and a stunning gold watch" (53). Introduced by John with a spate of possible signs foreshadowing the "coming dark," a Witness replies to the reporter's question about being "struck by anything striking": "No…. None" (53).

The play increasingly dramatizes not only the event's disappearance but the disappearance of any attendant action. Instead of trying to gain insight into the event, the characters indulge their concerns, which are periodically interrupted by fragments of television commercials or Frank playing a tape. Wondering whether dogs understand what is happening, John remembers a shepherd-collie being put to sleep while Michael remembers an uncle who taught him how to steer a skidding car and Constance recalls her first romance at day camp. The characters are also increasingly distracted. Frank looks under his desk for a dropped pencil; Constance observes a couple pedaling on a bicycle built for two; John becomes physically ill; and Michael reads the governor's pronouncements culminating in his welcoming the night—" 'Let the looting begin' " (58)—before sliding down a statehouse drainpipe and disappearing. With Frank calling upon every source he has for perspectives as he struggles to stay awake hoping for an end to the coverage, the play ends with him asleep at his desk as the Witness finally speaks beyond perfunctory comments. What he says, however, is more of the same disconnected images. For example, he saw a plane flying overhead and heard a band practicing, images that release images from the past. He once saw the governor at a gas station, and he remembers his parents tucking him in and whispering, "'Good night, sweet dreams'" (71).

The play could be a satiric treatment of media news coverage were it not for Eno cautioning against that interpretation in a prefatory note. The title is *Tragedy* with a subtitle, *A Tragedy*, the function of which is clarification of

the title. What is happening to tragedy is itself a tragedy. What is happening is that the form is inadequate for the content. The obliteration of life is the most tragic of events, yet the form dramatizing the content is so attenuated that it renders the event into a non-event and the attendant action into a non-action. The presentation is not in the classical form of tragedy as defined by Aristotle, an imitation of an action, but the implication is that the traditional genre is no longer vital and relevant; it puts audiences to sleep. As negative as this interpretation is, by the end of the introduction the interpretation may be positive.

Gina Gionfriddo's *After Ashley* is a satire of the media's packaging of tragedy. Three years after the homeless man he had befriended by hiring him to do yard work on their property raped and murdered wife Ashley, husband Alden wrote a book entitled *After Ashley* that the *New York Times* described as an "American epic tragedy."[2] The reviews earn him guest appearances on television talk shows such as *Profiles in Justice* where host David Gavin encourages him to talk not only about the crime's impact on him but its implication for America's values. Claiming that Ashley shared his concern for the underprivileged, Alden goes on to relate visiting the homeless man's mother and dedicating the book to her, a victim with her son of a mental health system that failed him. He also morally isolates right-wing conservatives who by exploiting the tragedy for their anti-welfare agenda would deny the underprivileged the help they need.

The satire is on full current. Promoted to producer, Gavin offers Alden the role of host of the talk show renamed *After Ashley* and focused on re-enacted sex crimes with interviews with the victims and law enforcement personnel demonstrating self-defense techniques. Alden seizes the "exceptional opportunity" (63), although the one episode taped for airing re-enacts the crime as a Gothic romance with the victim ravished by a caped stranger. He continues to cling to the opportunity even when his role in the dedication of a shelter for battered women named After Ashley and spawning a corps of volunteers called Ashley's Angels is a two-minute introduction of the philanthropic family that built the structure. He will not let go because the opportunity accords him celebrity status, which is the ultimate goal of self-invention in America.

Neither will Ashley and Alden's teenage son Justin let go of the opposition. In the one scene in which she is present, Ashley confides in Justin, then fourteen, that she is unhappy with Alden, the root of the unhappiness their sexual incompatibility. A pot smoker who cannot abide children or her husband's bleeding heart liberalism that is bringing, over her objection, a homeless person onto the property, she advises Justin not to marry before he knows himself, for marrying before she knew herself was her mistake. He in turn advises her to find activities outside of the house in which to discover interests. Unknown to him at the time, she joined an erotic exploration cult, a

discovery he uses for a collision with reality. Since he objects to his father's and Gavin's distorting of the truth that would make his mother a martyr on behalf of liberal causes, he plays a tape of her in erotic exploration at the dedication ceremony.

Were the above all there is to *After Ashley*, the examination would stop with a satire so heavy that a subtitle could be *With an Anvil*. Although praising aspects of the play, Christopher Isherwood faulted "plotting and dialogue [that] grow increasingly shrill and overstated" and Michael Feingold faulted the creation of characters like Alden "who are all cliché and no humanity."[3] Gionfriddo's play, however, is a three-tiered drama.

Like the first tier, the second tier has a collision of opposition with reality. Seventeen at the time of the play's action, Justin directs his anger, which at age fourteen he funneled into drugs, at everything his father and the producer, on whose show he appears with his father, say about his mother or propose as tributes to her memory. The tier is Justin's resistance to coming to terms with the tragedy, which is coming to terms with himself, for he has his mother's problem. Not knowing himself, he makes anyone who does not share his perception of reality the opposition, yet the more he resists becoming involved in the two men's tributes to Ashley, the less they become clichés. Countering his son's argument that his version of the tragedy is the only truthful one and tired of the hostility, Alden takes the position that each is entitled to his "experience of this event" (91). Gavin is more brutal, telling the teenager that after three years of "act[ing] out" his grief, "it's time to grow up and act like a man" (87). Justin even makes Julie, the girl he meets in a bar, the opposition until they begin to collaborate on sabotaging the dedication. Years ahead of him in maturing, she admits early in the relationship, "I just have to figure out what I am" (77).

The sabotage wrecking the dedication, indefinitely delaying the airing of the television show *After Ashley*, and cutting him off from his father, Justin collides with reality: what to do with his life—that is, how to create himself—after Ashley. With Julie's gentle prodding, he begins by admitting that he does not have "any coherent idea of who I am" (105). Having already collaborated with him on securing a tape of Ashley in erotic exploration by consenting to the taping of the two of them in the exploration, she joins with him on the quest for self-discovery, and the play ends with the two leaving hand in hand. The examination cannot stop here either. On two counts the second tier is intermediary between the first tier's satire on tragedy and the third tier's debate on tragedy. The first count is making the opposition more sympathetic than in the first tier, and the second count has to do with resolution. In the first tier, Justin resolves the difference between his knowledge of his mother and the false knowledge by sabotaging the dedication. In the second tier, he does not resolve. He realizes that he must quest to resolve knowing himself.

The third tier is also on full current when Julie, recognizing Justin as the son of the murdered mother, comes on to him in a bar, and he invites her to his apartment, where he plays a tape of a re-enacted sex crime to be aired on the television show. The viewing yields Julie's opposition to Justin's position on re-enactment. With the Aristotelian imitation substituted for re-enactment, the two teens debate tragedy's function with Julie the more thoroughly sympathetic character. He would not have re-enactments. She would, asking him, "So your solution is silence?" to which he replies, "Shutting the fuck up would be a start" (76-77). But if his position is the prevailing one, there would be no tragedy as an art form and no Greek tragedies performed through the ages. If there are re-enactments, he insists that they be absolutely faithful to the original crimes; she would have them modified for entertainment, though with him she opposes glamorizing the crimes as prurient romances. Here too she has tradition on her side. The original crimes in the myths that interact with the present in Greek tragedies are not re-enacted onstage. Messengers report the violence and avengers display it, as Clytemnestra does with Agamemnon's and Cassandra's bodies in the *Agamemnon* segment of the *Oresteia*. And the tragedies had to have an element of entertainment because they were performed with speech and song, music and dance in festivals celebrating Athens' prosperity.

The final disagreement the two teens have is with the benefit derived from the re-enactments. Believing that suffering cannot be meaningless, Julie suggests that reimagining "sorrows as gifts" is the "only way you heal" (75). If suffering has to have meaning, then for Justin it is revealing the truth, which for him is the truth as he sees it. As he says, the "only way to save" his mother from his father's and Gavin's distortions is "to trash her" (90). To do that, however, he must collide with reality. Since the cult leader will part with a tape of Ashley performing only if he can tape the two teens performing—re-enacting Ashley's performance—they consent. The collision changes them in that Justin realizes that he must have a life after Ashley, and Julie wants to be with him on the quest for self-discovery. They do not resume the debate, however, so that the play ends having raised questions about tragedy without resolving them: without, for example, resolving the relationship between tragedy and self-knowledge.

In the way in which the news media, or American writing, covers a tragic event, *Tragedy* implies that the genre has ceased to be a vital, relevant form. Except for the *New York Times* describing Alden's book as an "American epic tragedy" (59) and Julie suggesting that the re-telling lends crimes a "certain tragic beauty" (75), *After Ashley* does not invoke the genre. This study substituted the play's word, re-enactment, for imitation in Aristotle's definition, imitation of an action, to do the invoking. Before coming to a conclusion, however, about contemporary tragedy's health, the study has to examine a third drama because it not only invokes an ancient tragedy, it

reimagines it. In the chapter on the Biblical Book of Job in his study, Richard B. Sewall identifies what is central to tragedy as opposed to offering a definition of the genre. Suffering is central: "More than Prometheus or Oedipus, Job is the universal symbol for the western imagination of the mystery of undeserved suffering." And suffering has a function: "Suffering itself, as the Poet of Job defines it, has been made to yield knowledge, and the way has been plotted. After this achievement by the Poet of Job and after the similar achievement by Aeschylus in what may have been the same era of antiquity (the fifth century), the 'tragic form' was permanently available."[4]

Suffering is central to Thomas Bradshaw's *Job*. "Is the sense of tragedy palpable?" (52), Frank in the Studio asks John in the Field in *Tragedy*. Suffering was palpable in the New York production of *Job* partly because of the venue. The Flea Theater in Lower Manhattan is one of a host of Off- and Off-Off-Broadway venues that make the city the theatre capital that it is. The play was performed in the forty-seat downstairs space where a waist-high barrier is all that separates the audience in two rows of twenty seats each from the actors, making the experience immediate.

The play follows the Biblical story in outline, acknowledging in the program that portions are excerpted from the Bible. It differs in specific details and in the excesses in the details. *Job* opens with the protagonist sentencing to death by stoning a man his son Joshua charges with raping a girl. Joshua then rapes and sodomizes his sister Rachel so that even before the wager between God and Satan to test Job's faith, one of his sons is a rapist in a very physical scene of thrashing on the floor with Joshua continuing to violate his sister's body after she dies except for the few moments he stops to masturbate. Another brother enters, sees what Joshua did to Rachel, and in an equally violent and prolonged scene sodomizes him with a broomstick. Job is himself a victim when a man whose hand he had amputated gets his revenge when he and a son on the pretext of friendship blind and castrate him.

Violence predominates in the one-hour performance, although there is a ritual dance and there are interspersed comic scenes in which God, His brother Satan, and His sons Jesus and Dionysus take up positions around the space and do nothing but smile for interminable minutes, stopping only to sample wines. While God and Satan are intelligent, Jesus and Dionysus, who come close to fighting, seem somewhat retarded. Neither is every sex scene violent. His losses and health restored, Job enjoys renewed sexual prowess in simulated intercourse with his wife on his lap.

Bradshaw's *Job* has suffering galore, Sewall's first point. Whether it has Sewall's second point, that the suffering yields knowledge, has to be examined. The play ends as it began with Job dispensing justice. He amputates the two hands of a man apprehended stealing, even though the man pleads for mercy in his defense that he has no other means of feeding his starving family. Ben Brantley ended his review commenting on the final scene. "By

the way, Job does learn from his sufferings in this version. The man we see restored to power and glory at the end is more Godlike than ever. That in itself is a cause for Job-like lamentation." While agreeing with Brantley that Job gains the wrong knowledge, this study prefers to state that he does not learn because the knowledge should be that of his humanity: his bond with and compassion for other humans. For Sewall, the Biblical Job "sees his misfortunes not as unique but as typical of man's lot. In one phase of his being, at least, he is becoming a partisan of the human race."[5] Since the contemporary Job does not learn from his suffering, it is difficult thinking of *Job* as an authentic tragedy. Perhaps that is why Brantley called the play a "vigorously comic tragedy."[6]

Based on the progression from the boring coverage of a tragedy through the media's exploitation of a tragedy to a non-tragedy, the introduction seems to conclude that tragedy does not exist in the contemporary American theatre. If that were the case, however, no pages would follow, but since they do, tragedies do exist. When the progression is reversed, the approach to them emerges. Instead of evaluating all dramas that aspire to inclusion in the art form according to their conformity to the Aristotelian model, those that want to be appreciated for the conformity should be while those that do not should be appreciated for their new models. The study therefore does not offer a definition of tragedy. It examines the contemporary American theatre's creation of tragedies that do not put audiences to sleep.

The first two chapters divide plays whose experiences are thought of as tragic into four categories depending on their primary focus: isolation, loss of life, loss of hope, and suffering. Although suffering is found in all four categories, in the fourth category it either dominates the action or is the image that overwhelms all of the play's other images. Since a reader accustomed to traditional tragedies might not engage in the appreciation if thrust into the categories, each opens with a contemporary American reimagining of a Greek, Elizabethan, or Jacobean tragedy. Not a transplanting in another age such as Shakespeare's Richard III as a 1930s fascist dictator but a reimagining. The engaged reader can then begin to question whether all or some of the plays, six to a category, are tragedies.

Chapter One

Isolation and Loss of Life

In the introduction to a volume of three of his plays, A.R. Gurney looks back over his career as a playwright "both testing and celebrating the borders of the form." He then applies the testing and celebrating to the three plays in the volume, the first of which opens this study's examination of the category of isolation: "In *Another Antigone*, I try to work with and against the great Greek tragedy."[1] Sophocles' *Antigone* opens with a prologos in which Antigone informs her sister Ismene that with the invading army no longer a threat to Thebes, the ruler Creon has issued an edict involving their brothers, both of whom died in the combat. Eteocles is to be buried with "full honor," but Polyneices' corpse is to remain "unwept, untombed."[2] Furthermore, she intends to defy the edict and bury Polyneices despite Creon's decree that anyone attempting a burial will be put to death. Following the chorus' entrance in a parados, Creon enters to explain the edict. Eteocles died defending Thebes while Polyneices died leading the invading army. When a guard enters with the news that someone is attempting to bury the body, Creon orders him to apprehend the culprit or suffer the death penalty himself. When the guard leaves, the chorus sings the play's first great choral ode, followed by the guard returning with Antigone to bring her to a confrontation with Creon.

Gurney's *Another Antigone* opens on a confrontation in a university Classics professor's office between the professor, Henry, and a student, Judy, in his Greek Tragedy course. He cannot accept the term paper she wrote applying the Antigone myth to the nuclear arms race because it is not on an assigned topic, and she failed to get his permission to submit a paper on another topic. As they argue their positions, they agree that Sophocles' Antigone is the "classic rebel," his Creon the "ultimate image of uncompromising political authority," and their clash "inevitable and tragic" (104) but little else

so that their intransigence makes her another Antigone and him another Creon. She needs credit in his course to graduate because she has a job waiting for her in a tough job market; he is sympathetic, but the paper does not meet the course's requirement. If he will accept a dramatized version, she will convert the paper into a play; he cannot accept that either because she fails to understand the course's subject: the nature of tragedy. The confrontation and scene end with her determined to put the "play *on*" (108).

Another Antigone has a scene with the Sophoclean great choral ode, but it occurs later in the play. Since Gurney eliminates Ismene, the guard, and the chorus, one has to ask what he does in the scenes between the opening and the ode. Among other things, he tests the form. In one scene, for example, he has a character for whom *Antigone* has no counterpart, a dean, Diana, come to Henry's office and light a cigarette, prompting a discussion of the dangers to one's health that smoking poses. Just when it seems that Gurney is stretching the form to the breaking point, he relaxes the stretching to return to the reimagined play's action: the risk to Henry's career that not accepting Judy's paper poses. Since his courses traditionally are not well attended because few students major in Classics, he risks having them canceled for lack of enrollment if he persists in alienating Judy and other students by not relaxing his requirements. He persists. Meanwhile, rather than submit a new paper on an assigned topic, Judy enlists her boyfriend, Dave, a counterpart to the Sophoclean heroine's fiancé, in helping her mount the play adaptation of her paper. Locked into their intransigence, the two antagonists bring *Another Antigone* to the choral ode.

By now it should be obvious that unlike the classical play, the contemporary play has comedy. But it also has tragedy foreshadowed in the choral ode. Analyzing the ode as it was originally performed, Raymond Williams finds in three of the closing lines that the "intensity of the dramatic feelings is almost overpowering":

> When he honours the laws of the land and the gods' sworn right
> High indeed is his city; but stateless the man
> Who dares to dwell with dishonour.[3]

The feelings are overpowering because while singing the lines, the chorus members gesture casting out of the polis the culprit who violates the laws, and as they do, in disbelief they are forced to recognize Antigone, whom the guard is bringing to Creon. Admitting her role in the attempted burial, she justifies it by honoring the "gods' unwritten and unfailing laws" (454), such as duty to one's family and reverence for the dead, that take precedence over man's laws. Creon is equally unrelenting in his position. She must die.

The contemporary delivery is not comic, but it is more easygoing than the original until it approaches the closing lines. In the classroom Henry translates portions of the ode. To show that he is aware of the feminist movement,

he adds "woman" to "'Man,'" and to further show that he is not stodgy, he adds "planes, rockets, computers, laser beams" to the "images on the taming of nature: ships, plows, fishnets, ox-yokes." Approaching the closing lines, he pauses to comment on the line naming death as the one thing that the human being cannot tame before resuming "*grimly*" with the something "*worse* than death" to the Greeks that is named in the three lines. If in pride he/she goes "'too far,'" he/she becomes

> An exile without a country,
> Lost and alone
> Homeless and outlawed forever (131)

The feeling is not in a gesture. It is in Henry repeating more than once portions of the three lines. He does not have to know that exile is his fate, but already warned about the university canceling underenrolled courses, he must be imagining a life apart from the university and the career to which he has dedicated his life, for his translation confines the original "stateless" to the first line while expanding the feeling of isolation to the second and third lines.

As somber as this scene is, Gurney continues to test the form by mixing the characters in witty interactions with the sense of impending isolation in scenes that dissolve into scenes so that no matter how far a scene strays from the original, the next scene recalls the original, although in contemporary terms. In *Antigone* the heroine's lover Haemon urges his father Creon to relent and not punish his betrothed for an act that was glorious. In *Another Antigone* Dave submits a paper he wrote under Judy's name hoping to earn credit for her so that she can graduate, but Henry recognizes the deception. Yet under questioning Dave impresses the professor with his knowledge of the classics, and unlike Haemon, he does not join the girl he loves in her stand but switches majors from Chemistry to Classics to study under Henry, not realizing the professor's courses were canceled for insufficient enrollment, dissolving the Classics Department.

If Henry took the year's paid leave of absence the university offered him, he would not be a tragic hero. He is because he removes himself from the university community, explaining in his closing lecture what he always knew but has only come to understand this semester. Addressing the audience, he distills the essence of tragedy in the responsibility that tragic heroes accept, as Creon does for "his commitment to abstract and dehumanizing laws" (170) and he himself does by disappearing. Also addressing the audience, Judy accepts responsibility by not "feel[ing] good about" her "life anymore" (171) before declining to accept the award for her play because the play taught her that her former goals—personal ambition, success, and money—are not that important anymore.